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ABSTRACT

This Research Action Brief describes five studies designed to test techniques for decreasing disruptive student conduct in the secondary school classroom. The two behavior modification studies discussed showed strong positive results. Questions remain, however, concerning the permanence of behavior changes that are dependent on reward systems and concerning the wisdom of associating appropriate behavior with rewards not intrinsic to the behavior itself. The two humanistic studies in class management concentrated on the rapport created between students and teachers. The first involved teaching communication techniques to teachers, while the second revealed that alternative schools suffer from far fewer disciplinary problems than do traditional schools. The fifth study combined elements of both types of approach. A high level of interaction between teacher and student, derived from humanist thinking, was used as the reward in a system derived from behavior modification. (Author/PGD)

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RESEARCH ACTION BRIEF

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Each ***Research Action Brief*** reports the findings of significant empirical research studies on a topic in educational management. From these findings implications are drawn for the operation of today's schools, thus serving as a guide for enlightened administrative action.

This ***Research Action Brief*** was prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management for distribution by the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Classroom Discipline

Each year from 1969 to 1975 the Gallup poll asked Americans to name major problems facing the public schools. In six of those seven years respondents chose discipline as the schools' number one problem. In 1976 Gallup stopped asking the question; nevertheless, in that year discipline problems emerged as the problem most Americans would choose to tackle if they were members of citizen advisory boards. In 1977 concern about discipline took an alarming turn. Twenty-five percent of Americans admitted they feared for the physical safety of their children in school.

Classroom management problems are difficult for those who work with elementary students. But for those who must work with high school students—who are often bigger and more capable of violence than are teachers—the problem is even more difficult. The problem at the secondary school level is compounded by a relative lack of supporting research. Although large numbers of educational researchers have turned their attention to classroom management in elementary schools, a comparatively small number—perhaps because of the greater difficulty of the problem—have focused on discipline problems of adolescents.

Of those classroom management studies that have been undertaken in secondary schools, most have used behavior modification techniques. Students are rewarded for appropriate behavior with tokens redeemable for grades or leisure time or release from school. Most of the time these techniques work. Inappropriate behavior decreases and grades often rise. Short-range effects are impressive. Long-range effects are unknown.

A few researchers have experimented with more humanistic approaches to classroom discipline. These approaches stress improved communication and rapport between student and teacher and respect for student ideas and feelings. Although these studies are less scientific than the behavioral studies, proponents claim their techniques and long-range effects are more consistent with the overall goals of education.

While some student behaviors, such as vandalism or assault of other students, are considered unethical and undesirable in any context, the problem behaviors focused on in this report are rather those that get in the way of learning. Behaviors like talking to friends or laughing are not somehow "evil" in themselves; rather they are "inappropriate" in the classroom when they prevent work from being done.

Behavior Modification

One problem with using behavior modification techniques with adolescents is that it is hard to find reinforcers that work. Teenagers are not motivated by gold stars or M&Ms. Grades are not desirable rewards for many students. Even teacher praise lacks power in many instances. Experimenters have found, however, that secondary students can be motivated by the promise of free time or early release from school.

Vernon, in a three-phase study involving a high school English class, began by trying to modify undesirable student behavior such as whispering, talking, or laughing by instructing the teacher to express approval of desired behaviors and ignore undesirable behaviors. Vernon described the results of this first experiment as "dismal," and indeed after three weeks undesirable behavior actually increased. In the second phase of the experiment, Vernon tried rewarding classwork with tokens redeemable for credit toward letter grades. After an initial interest period, this too failed with all but the most able students, who began to settle down and start working. Vernon concluded that these attempts failed because teacher praise and grades are not desirable rewards for adolescents.

In the final phase of the experiment, Vernon directed the teacher again to give tokens for classwork, but this time the tokens were redeemable for early release on Friday. Almost immediately the entire class began to earn tokens at a high rate and the percentage of behavior that could be classified as misbehavior dropped from 34 percent to 8 percent. Thus a drop in misbehavior and a rise in academic performance went hand in hand. When students became more motivated to work, they did not have time for the whispering and laughing that had gone on previously.

The method of eliminating undesirable behavior Vernon used in his third phase is based on "Premack's Principle." This principle states that the rate of a lower probability behavior (such as studying) can be increased if a higher probability behavior (such as talking to friends) is made contingent on its occurrence. What this means (although a behaviorist would never say it this way) is that people are more apt to do something they should do but dislike if they reward themselves with something they like to do. Premack's Principle is also sometimes called "Grandma's Law." Under this name, it goes something like "First we work, and then we play."

There are several ways to use Premacks's Principle to manage adolescent behavior. One is the method Vernon used, which is sometimes called the "proclamation" method. This means that the teacher or experimenter unilaterally issues a "proclamation" concerning how the system will function and what the rewards will be. The other method is "contracting" or "contingency contracting." In this system, students and teachers jointly formulate a contract stipulating what undesirable behavior will be eliminated, what desirable behavior will be stressed, and what the rewards will be.

Sapp and three student teachers had positive results using contracting to involve students in designing a reward system. In the first of three studies, thirty extremely disruptive sophomores were asked to pinpoint class behavior problems and their preferred freetime activities. Students complained that other students were inattentive, talked without permission, made noise, and refused to participate in discussions. Their favorite freetime activities were listening to records, talking to friends, and walking around the room. When a contract was instituted rewarding appropriate behavior with freetime activities, inappropriate behavior dropped from 75 percent to 15 percent of behavior.

Sapp and his colleagues then tried a similar program with seniors who were unenthusiastic about classwork. Classroom discussions with students resulted in a contract stipulating that if students would complete a minimum number of pages correctly, they could go to the library and read magazines or visit quietly with friends. Students completed more work, and the class average rose from C- to B+. The third study, with twenty juniors in a predominantly black inner-city high school, had similar results.

Sapp and his colleagues identified two crucial factors that determined success of these projects. The first was consistent application of behavior management principles. Positive consequences always followed positive behavior. The second significant factor was student involvement in setting up the programs.

Doubts and Fears

These methods for managing classroom behavior are very impressive. The data are sound and consistent. When behavior modification techniques are used in the classroom, disruptive behavior decreases and desirable behaviors increase.

But educators must look beyond individual studies or even effective programs. They look at the whole child and the goals of the whole educational program. Sometimes methods that effectively solve one problem cause other problems that are even more serious. For example, classroom discipline problems could probably be effectively eliminated by threatening students with the prospect of forty lashes. But other overall goals of the educational program would be destroyed. While it is hard to quibble with the use of behavior modification techniques with those who cannot be reached any other way (such as infants or the severely retarded), their use with normal adolescents of average intelligence is open to more criticism.

Critics of these behavior mod techniques fear that desirable behavior will go away when rewards are withdrawn. How will students behave in other settings? How self-disciplined will they be in later life, in college, at work? If one of the goals of education is to create independent self-managing adults, is it possible that accustoming students to being rewarded for good behavior will ultimately be counterproductive?

There is some evidence for this criticism. In the first study reported by Sapp and his colleagues, when rewards were withdrawn, students quickly returned to their previous levels of inappropriate behavior. Many other studies report a similar regression when rewards are withdrawn.

Other critics go beyond the fear that students who become dependent on rewards for good behavior will be unruly in other situations. They fear that offering rewards for working quietly implies that the work is not worth doing for its own sake. Adolescents disciplined in such a system may never know the satisfactions of achievement for its own sake, the fulfillment and growth that spring from self-motivated effort.

Whether or not one accepts behavior modification techniques for use in classroom management depends in part on how one views discipline problems. Critics like John Holt have suggested that students become bored and unruly because of being forced to engage in trivial, meaningless activities.

Some maintain that discipline problems are a symptom of something wrong in schools or in the larger society. Behaviorism, like aspirin, affects only the symptom. It does nothing to cure or treat a serious condition that may in fact grow worse while the pain is temporarily alleviated. Behavior disruptions in school may be more serious than just a common headache.

Humanists maintain that behavior modification techniques are dangerous because they require teachers to treat students as less than human. Students are manipulated like pawns on a chess board. Is it possible that the more we assume that students cannot be self-limiting and self-motivating, the less self-limiting and self-motivating they will be? Does a behavior modification system produce a classroom or society of well-behaved robots?

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What Are the Alternatives?

Because of the effectiveness of behavior modification techniques on classroom discipline, very little current research is being done on other methods. A few researchers, however, are experimenting with other approaches.

One theory holds that how well teachers communicate with students and accept student feelings can have effects on classroom discipline. Saba, in a study that included fifteen secondary teachers, found that a teacher inservice human relations program had significant effects on students' behavior.

The inservice program concentrated on training teachers to recognize and accept students' feelings. Techniques taught were the most basic counseling skills. The teachers learned to listen effectively to students and pay special attention to nonverbal cues. They learned to perceive both the content of a statement and the feelings implicit in it. Finally, they learned to communicate that they understood and accepted student feelings as valid—even if the feelings students expressed were different from their own.

After the training session, each teacher chose a misbehaving student and devoted two weeks to treatment of that student. Treatment consisted of contacting the problem student whenever feasible, initiating conversation, and communicating acceptance of feelings.

Incidents of misbehavior dropped from 202 to 106 per week for grades 10-12 and from 355 to 110 per week in grades 7-9, both a significant drop. In addition, a large majority of teachers said they felt more confident in handling discipline problems and more optimistic about students they previously regarded as incorrigible.

Another study points the way toward other possible approaches to student discipline. Perry and Duke contend that the environment of the school can affect adolescent behavior. These researchers found that behavior problems are much less severe in alternative schools.

In a study of eighteen California schools-within-a-school, Perry and Duke found that behavior problems were of greater concern in conventional high schools than alternative schools. They also found that there were fewer behavior problems in alternative schools and that these problems were less severe. There was no disrespect of teachers in the alternative schools, and class disruptiveness, aggressive behavior, and disrespect toward peers were rarely reported.

Perry and Duke hypothesized that four basic factors were influential. These were the small size of the school, treatment of students as young adults, realistic attitudes toward student behavior, and informality, responsiveness, and understanding from teachers. In most of the schools studied, students were allowed to help with rule-making and deal with behavior problems.

Humanistic Behaviorism

Some approaches promise the success of behavioral approaches but with fewer of the problems that so trouble critics. A study by McAllister and colleagues used not tokens but teacher praise as a reward. Surprisingly, in the light of Vernon's and other studies that had poor success with using praise as a reward for adolescents, these researchers had

good success in reducing inappropriate talking and turning around in a low-track English class.

Although it is impossible to determine with certainty why the use of teacher praise and disapproval worked here, some guesses can be made. For one thing, the teacher who undertook the program felt she had been able to achieve some rapport with students before the program began. It is possible that the students' regard for the teacher caused her praise to be valued and her disapproval to matter to them. In contrast, the teacher in Vernon's study was new and had only spent a few weeks with students before the study began. Another difference between McAllister's study and Vernon's was that while Vernon's teacher only ignored misbehaviors, McAllister's teacher openly and clearly showed her disapproval.

Such a program may allay critics' fears because intangibles, like praise and blame, are easier to internalize than tokens. If students are influenced by value statements of teachers, they may also at the same time be internalizing these values.

Implications

The studies described here use two very different approaches to secondary school classroom management. The currently popular behavior modification approach uses rewards to reduce classroom disruptions and to motivate students to work. The more humanistic approaches use acceptance of students' feelings and creation of a nurturing school climate to eliminate the frustrations that cause student disruptions.

Those principals who feel most comfortable with behavior modification approaches will encourage teachers to use these programs or will institute their own reward systems with chronically disruptive students. One hazard with such approaches is the institution of inconsistent or poorly thought-out programs based on superficial understanding of behavioral principles. For the best results, both teachers and administrators must be carefully trained in behavioral theories and techniques.

Those principals who are frightened by the implications of behavior modification and who accept the more humanistic approaches will treat students as young adults rather than as children and encourage teachers to do the same. Inservice training for them will focus on learning to communicate acceptance of students and their feelings. Principals may want to divide a large and impersonal school into several intimate schools-within-a-school that stress informality and personal contact between students and teachers.

Those who shy away from token economies and point systems yet who are impressed by the success of behavioral systems might consider combining elements of the two approaches to achieve a program like McAllister's. Counseling techniques like Saba's or the conditions that Perry and Duke found in alternative schools could first be instituted to improve communication and rapport among students, teachers, and administrators. These methods and conditions would pave the way for a program like McAllister's in which teachers consistently reinforce behavior with praise or disapproval. A program like this has the advantage of promoting classroom discipline while treating students as self-directing human beings.

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